

Springer Series in Design and Innovation 34

Daniel Raposo  
João Neves  
Ricardo Silva *Editors*

# Perspectives on Design III

Research, Education and Practice

 Springer

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Daniel Raposo · João Neves · Ricardo Silva  
Editors

# Perspectives on Design III

Research, Education and Practice

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# Preface

The purpose of design is the conception of artefacts with value and utility for human beings, which have the potential to facilitate the use, understanding, communication, access, comfort, and safety of the user.

By excluding the human factor in the design project, we turn objects into a mere formal exercise that does not achieve design status. Design exists for people and design artefacts make sense in a social context. In these times where exclusivity, equality and sustainability are proclaimed, social design emerges as an innovative way of designing where people are put first and thus, refer that design goes far beyond the aesthetics of the product.

As a discipline and project activity, design combines multiple factors, including ethical, logical-functional and aesthetic, operational requirements, production, and economic constraints, determined by the context, compatible with the needs, aspirations, and lifestyles of the addressees. Design implies the identification of data, and its analysis and synthesis are essential to generate information and knowledge, allowing informed decisions to be made throughout the design process. Through an analytical action of the respective data, it is possible to identify patterns, trends, and gaps, as well as to better understand the needs and behaviours of stakeholders and users in a competitive context, as well as to evaluate the interest, performance, and impact of design proposals.

From the author's perspective, design should be the result of an enlightened view of the problem in a context, constituting itself as a creative manifestation that aims to express ideas and concepts and fulfil a useful function for people, considering a cultural context, time, and market.

On the other hand, from the perspective of product production, design plays a fundamental role in the optimization and efficiency of processes, both in saving resources, reducing waste, environmental impact, and improving energy efficiency, namely through the circularity of the production cycle, all of which ends up referring us to the current trend of sustainable design.

Considering merely the object, design ensures the utility of things, optimizing the form and performance of artefacts for human factors (physical, visual, symbolic,

and emotional) and in a sustainable way in the social, environmental, and economic dimensions.

From a design perspective, artefacts are interfaces that mediate the communication or performance of useful functions to people in a context of use, in a complexity of relationships between the individual and the product (including at the end of the product's life). The design object fulfils aesthetic, cultural, symbolic, and functional functions in full combination.

Thus, in design aesthetics plays one role from the various requirements for the good performance of artefacts and design is the way to give shape to these same objects, considering that man is at the centre of design activity.

In recent decades, design and design thinking have been highlighted for their strategic contribution in the development and active implementation, reality, it is possible to affirm that it is the catalyzing strategy for innovation, regeneration processes, and improvement action in research, teaching, business, government, or social contexts.

Research and innovation processes in design have gained importance in both academia and industry, seeking to respond to social problems, especially in complex frameworks or even contributing to advances in the technological field.

Future Design consist in co-creating artefacts for future scenarios, which are defined based on information about stakeholders, key resources, signals, trends, drivers, and forecasts. Therefore, Future Design aligns current needs with future values.

If we take as a reference the 17 Sustainable Development Goals defined by UN for the year 2030, we get the clear notion that design research can actively and significantly contribute to addressing the most pressing global challenges, such as poverty, hunger, inequality, climate change, and quality education, just to highlight a few. Within this scenario, we observe how Design also holds a strong social component, where it plays an important role in making the world more inclusive.

Taking all these factors into account, the book we are now publishing is a good example of the alignment of design research with UNESCO's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, as can be seen in two sections:

- I. Communication Design and Design Education as a Catalyst for Change
- II. Fashion Design and Product Design for Sustainability and Collaboration

The chapters of the first section seek to deepen knowledge on the contribution of co-design methodologies to new models of governance that are more open and participatory, models of cooperation and development integrating the perspective of stakeholders. In the same section we find articles that inquire about the multi-disciplinary and integrative character of design, as well as about models of design teaching, considering interaction, social expectations, and environmental problems.

The second section presents a set of chapters that explore the role of imagination in design, the challenges brought by trends for fashion design practice in the post-industrial era, the relationships between fashion design education and sustainability, the Circular Economy, Upcycling technique, and the study of Prospective Ergonomic. Finally, the contribution of furniture design in the creation of more collaborative and

sharing scenarios, as well as intersections between design research, the business sector, music, and performing arts.

The chapters presented are the result of an invitation made by the Steering Committee to the authors who best demonstrated their research skills with the best papers presented at the 8th EIMAD—International Meeting of Research in Music, Arts and Design, 2022, Portugal. Nevertheless, new, and relevant contents are presented, new perspectives on design research, its teaching and professional practice.

Although we recommend reading this book in its entirety, it allows reading centred on themes and by chapter.

Castelo Branco, Portugal

Daniel Raposo  
João Neves  
Ricardo Silva

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# **Communication Design and Design Education as a Catalyst for Change**

# Youth Participation in Local Governance: Co-designing in the Democracy Reloading Initiative



Olga Glumac , Anne Grønsund, Laura Van de Vyver, Ellen De Grauwe, Filipa Pereira, Amal Hamich, and Laszlo Foldi

**Abstract** This paper investigates co-design methodologies aimed at enhancing local democracy practices through stakeholder engagement and direct cooperation between children and/or young people and municipal workers. The authors introduce their approaches to implementing the Democracy Reloading framework in their respective regional/national practices. Democracy Reloading, launched in 2015 as an initiative between Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps National Agencies, is a comprehensive programme that identifies 24 essential competencies for effectively involving young people in decision-making within municipalities. The authors emphasise the significance of capacity building and mentorship for fostering long-term intergenerational collaboration, highlighting key findings from their co-design practices in Belgium, Norway, and Portugal. The paper underscores the collaborative efforts of Erasmus+ Youth National Agencies, practitioners, and experts, aiming to contribute to structural changes in local governance. The co-design approach aims to ensure setting up the foundations of the necessary changes

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in a systematic way. By exploring this topic, the paper sheds light on the relevance of this initiative for social innovation at the European and national scales.

**Keywords** Youth participation · Local governance · Co-design · Democracy  
Reloading

## 1 Introduction

This paper describes and analyses the approaches to the co-designing and operationalisation of collaborative frameworks and new democratic practices through intergenerational partnerships at the municipal level. They upvote the knowledge that already exists on the application of co-design in active youth citizenship [1], for democracy [2] and social innovation [3]. The authors start from problem framing to defining a roadmap for social innovation through systematic change [4]. They describe attempts to embed co-design capability within social systems to improve their functionality towards youth participation in local governance.

The establishment of norms for youth participation and the alignment of expectations between young people and adults in families, schools, neighbourhoods, and cities are pivotal factors being addressed. Schools have the potential to serve as effective gateways to citizenship by actively promoting the development of citizen-driven competencies and ensuring young individuals have the freedom to exercise their rights. However, expanding civic participation beyond schools to the neighbourhood and municipal level often remains limited to youth councils [5], participatory budgeting initiatives [6] and youth-led projects within youth associations. The need to institutionalise youth participation [7] and establish youth-friendly environments in municipalities remains. With it, young individuals may feel more welcomed and valued in democratic processes. This includes providing accessible physical spaces, utilising digital platforms, and implementing policies that enable the engagement of diverse youth populations in the long-term. Inclusivity empowers young people to contribute their unique perspectives, breaking down barriers and promoting a sense of belonging and ownership.

Efforts to strengthen democracy through local youth participation align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) defined by UNESCO 2030. SDG 4, focused on Quality Education, underscores the importance of education for sustainable development and the promotion of global citizenship. All relevant stakeholders such as policymakers, municipal workers, professors, other professionals in the youth field, students and young people in general with the requisite knowledge and skills contribute to the establishment of a more balanced democratic society. Moreover, youth participation in democracy can support SDG 16, which centres on Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. This goal aims to foster peaceful and inclusive societies, ensure universal access to justice, and build effective and accountable institutions at all levels. Young people engaged in democratic processes help cultivate

transparency, responsiveness, diversification of ideas and solutions and participatory governance, which can enhance the realisation of SDG 16.

The New European Bauhaus initiative, launched by the European Commission in 2020, seeks to integrate sustainability, aesthetics, and inclusivity in the design and creation of urban spaces. While not directly correlated, the principles of inclusivity and participation embedded in the New European Bauhaus initiative align with the concept of involving young people in shaping their communities and engaging them in decision-making processes. Both initiatives share common objectives of fostering inclusivity, sustainability, and active citizenship, albeit employing distinct approaches.

Youth empowerment represents a complex challenge, and the authors critically examine existing barriers that hinder progress. In some cases, these barriers include the lack of, (i) diversification of engagement formats when it comes to youth citizenship; (ii) long-term or day-to-day practices promoted to youth; and (iii) and the effective involvement of local authorities and decision-makers (schools, other relevant institutions) in supporting and amplifying youth voices. The authors consider that youth citizenship is achieved when young individuals are ready to express their opinions and critically reflect on the actions that have an impact on their lives (e.g. conditions at school to eat healthy meals, propose reading materials, recommend how public space should be used, etc.); while people in intermediary or decision-making positions take those opinions on board, continuing discussion with young people and jointly finding the solutions. With the democratisation of processes through the participatory design movement, there have already been advancements when children and young people co-design educational programmes [8], policies [9] and other matters of their concern [10]. In some cases, the children and young people are trained designers while in others they are in-training through collaborative projects that foster youth participation. There is no distinction in ownership and social responsibility between a trained young designer and a young designer in training [11]. These approaches can be influenced through evidence-based policymaking when investigating and demonstrating the positive impact of youth on the development of local communities and their competencies in local governance [12].

The practice of citizenship can only work if integrated systematically into all pores of education and community life so that it becomes natural for young people, and other relevant stakeholders, to practise it every day in interactions in schools and local communities. In addition, there is an increasing recognition of the capacity-building needs of local policymakers and municipal workers responsible for developing effective strategies, action plans, engagement formats, and practices to achieve meaningful outcomes in civic youth participation. While there has been a lot of work already performed in the capacity-building of youth and youth workers, for the past decade, the focus has included the capacity-building of municipalities and their employees. The efforts are driven by international, regional, national and local policies, strategic partnerships, and initiatives funded through mechanisms like the Erasmus+ Youth programme, available to the European Union and associated countries.

One such example is the Democracy Reloading initiative [13] introduced and commented on in the subsequent sections. The authors of this chapter are composed

of municipal workers, trainers and researchers who were selected by their National Agencies for Erasmus+ and underwent long-term training of trainers for Democracy Reloading from June 2022 until April 2023. They joined to reflect on and share their co-design in democracy practices in Norway, Belgium and Portugal. To provide evidence-based insights, the authors employ, test and validate the programmatic co-design methodologies proposed in Democracy Reloading and describe their attempts to leverage social innovation and systemic change to elucidate the participatory processes, results, and outcomes of implemented and assessed activities. The methodology and approach will be shared with the Democracy Reloading network and national agencies for replication in other European contexts.

## 2 Democracy Reloading Approach

### 2.1 Background

Democracy Reloading was launched in 2015 as a collaborative programme initiated by 10 Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps National Agencies to improve the effectiveness of young people’s involvement in local governance and decision-making processes through engagement of municipalities, youth, experts and researchers (see Fig. 1).



Co-designed between national agencies, experts, researchers and youth internationally to support co-design in democracy locally

**Fig. 1** Democracy reloading co-design framework

The partnership has designed a specific participatory methodology based on long-term research and experience in this topic. 24 competencies essential to create conditions, capacities and structures that can reach the aim of local governance with youth were co-designed.

These competencies were incorporated into a Reference Framework (see Fig. 2), encompassing attitudes, values, knowledge, and skills required for the development of a supportive environment within municipalities, including youth empowerment for municipal decision-making, development of strategies and structures to support youth in municipal decision-making and management of such practices and impact assessment. It thus supports youth representatives at the local, regional, and national levels while recognising young people’s rights to participate and self-organise.

In addition, the partnership developed a Toolkit (see Fig. 3) to accompany each competence with various resources that aid in understanding theories and concepts, exploring related practices and success stories, and enhancing implementation skills. The Toolkit is aligned with the European Youth Strategy 2019–2027 [14], which actively engages young people, youth organisations, and other youth work organisers in policies that impact young people’s lives at all levels. The municipalities and others interested in the Reference Framework and Toolkit are invited to do an online self-assessment and identify their gaps according to the Reference Framework and prioritise these in their capacity-building.

The initiative proceeded with the dissemination and exploitation of the Reference Framework and Toolkit by developing launch events, webinars, international training courses, stakeholder meetings, study visits and other knowledge-transfer events to

REFERENCE FRAMEWORK OF COMPETENCES FOR ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE IN MUNICIPAL DECISION-MAKING				
<i>For officers of municipalities or entrusted organisations who work with/for engaging young people in decision-making</i>				
KEY TASKS / COMPETENCE	Creating a supportive environment within the municipality to involve young people in decision-making	Empowering young people and their organisations and communities to participate in municipal decision-making	Developing policy, strategy and structure for youth participation in decision-making	Managing youth participation in decision-making and validating its impact
<b>Values and attitude</b>	I believe youth participation is essential for a sustainable democratic culture. I challenge those who hold negative opinions or stereotypes about young people.	I am ready to involve young people with special needs and fewer opportunities. I value the ideas and proposals of young people.	I uphold the values of democracy, Human Rights and the rule of law as basis for a democratic culture. I see young people as full, equal citizens of my community.	I feel comfortable with being among young people and I am open to take part in activities with them. I am ready to manage the different needs of the diverse stakeholders and targeted youth groups.
<b>Knowledge</b>	I follow the legal frameworks on local, national and European level in relation to youth participation in decision-making. I understand the political environment of the municipality in relation to youth policy.	I know how to find evidence about the needs and realities of young people of my community. I know the diverse landscape of the local youth community.	I am familiar with other existing practices of youth participation in decision-making. I am familiar with the theories and models of youth participation in decision-making.	I know the essentials project and programme management. I know financial instruments (grants, resources, programmes) that support youth participation.
<b>Skills</b>	I advocate for youth participation in decision-making to get the support of public servants and political representatives. I mobilize and cooperate with other relevant stakeholders at all levels for improving youth participation in decision-making.	I support the empowerment of young people in relation to participation in decision-making. I communicate and cooperate with young people on equal grounds, safely and using appropriate language.	I am able to give and receive feedback and learn from mistakes. I design strategies and plans that ensure youth participation in decision-making.	I disseminate the results and achievements of youth participation within the wider community. I use appropriate digital services and technologies to improve youth participation in decision-making.
<b>Organisational environment</b>	The political representatives recognise and support youth participation in decision-making. The municipality staff is motivated and trained to involve young people in decision-making.	Young people and their organisation are ready and able to participate in decision-making. There are committed and active youth representatives and leaders who take part in decision-making.	The municipality has an evidence based policy/strategy for youth participation in decision-making. There is a structural/system in place that ensures youth participation in decision-making.	The municipality provides necessary resources and facilities to involve young people in decision-making. The municipality makes a visible and public commitment to young people.

Fig. 2 Democracy reloading reference framework

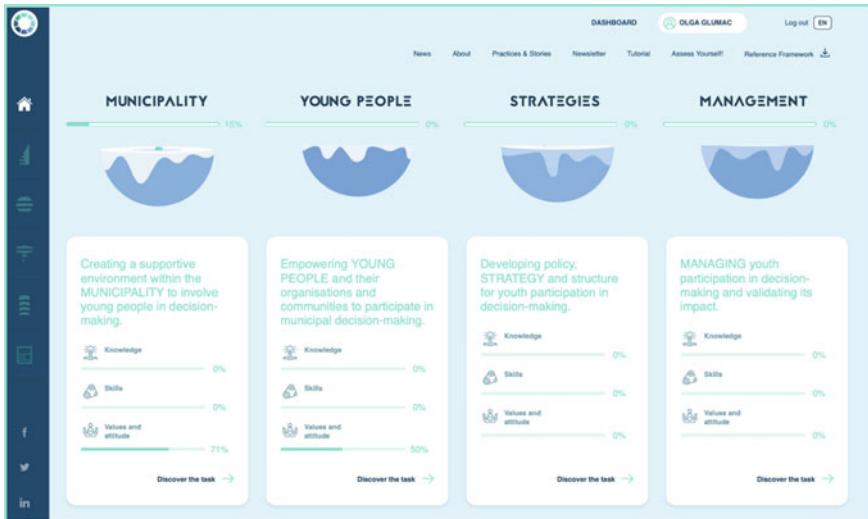


Fig. 3 Democracy reloading toolkit

bolster the scalability at the European scale. Also, a pool of experts has been created to foster continuous support and mentorship of the municipalities interested to pursue this path.

## 2.2 Methodology

Democracy Reloading is a long-lasting initiative (2015–2027) that has thus far mapped and defined the required competencies necessary to achieve organisational change in the work of municipalities and the local context in which they operate. The Erasmus+ Youth National Agencies collaborated with practitioners and experts in the youth field through research and collective learning activities to identify these competencies. The production of the toolkit and platform was managed by the Bureau International Jeunesse, the French-speaking national agency of the Erasmus+ Youth programme in Belgium. The Toolkit is a step-by-step dynamic user-focused learning platform with up-to-date information, theories, practices, and resources for “reloading” democracy through youth participation in decision-making. It adopts a user-centred approach based on non-formal education methods [15] to stimulate self-organised learning. The primary users of this platform are municipal workers, yet it can be utilised by consultants, youth workers, researchers and other experts with interest in youth. Among municipal workers, the recommendation is to carefully consider appropriate individuals to engage in the learning process. Each user is encouraged to do a self-assessment available on the Democracy Reloading platform and identify organisational/individual strengths and weaknesses concerning youth

participation in decision-making. Democracy Reloading has already delivered more than 10 international webinars to inform and sensitise target audiences to join and upvote capacity-building as proposed by the initiative. It has thus developed and implemented 2 long-term training-of-trainers courses to encourage professionals and youth associations to support municipalities to enhance their abilities. Finally, it developed 3 pieces of international training for the municipalities and municipal workers. In addition, the initiative has developed a pilot training course aimed at young people between 15 and 20 years to support their self-empowerment so they can gain stronger self-efficacy in having more impact in their municipality in the long-term.

### ***2.3 Stakeholders' Engagement***

The relevant stakeholders such as municipalities, municipal workers, youth, youth workers, youth associations and other experts were mapped out early in the process through the existing frameworks and initiatives of the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps National Agencies. The agencies also mobilised their pool of trainers to create in-house experts. The stakeholders continue to have opportunities on different occasions to participate in capacity-building, become partners and co-hosts of local/regional events, validate and iterate the proposed methodology and co-create more effective methods and tools that become a repository of good practices. Annual events such as conferences and stakeholder meetings are developed to share the learning outcomes from participating countries and to sustain community growth.

### ***2.4 Scaling Up, Out and Deep***

Reflecting on the progress made thus far, the initiative has achieved success in raising awareness about youth participation relevance and introducing the Democracy Reloading approach to a significant number of municipalities and municipal workers. However, the most formidable challenge encountered was engaging decision-makers in positions of authority, to drive tangible actions within the municipalities and facilitate the practical implementation of the approach. This process of scaling up and deep required concerted efforts to develop customised roadmaps, tailored to the distinct procedures, laws, and cultural nuances surrounding youth participation in each local environment. Furthermore, the placement of trained professionals, who had completed the Democracy Reloading training-of-trainers, within the municipalities play a crucial role in achieving long-term capacity-building and mentorship of staff. These professionals exhibited greater success in transferring knowledge and effectively integrating the Democracy Reloading approaches by transforming existing organisational structures.

The subsequent section delves into the process of scaling out, where trainers-in-training of Democracy Reloading adopt and apply the approach within their respective local and national contexts. Each co-author contributes by elucidating the appropriation of the approach and the subsequent knowledge transfer that took place.

### 3 Four Cases of Democracy Co-design

#### 3.1 *Co-design in Democracy Practice in Lister, Norway*

*Context.* In the Lister region, the Norwegian National Agency of Erasmus+ Youth on behalf of the Democracy Reloading initiative has organised a pilot for capacity-building of four Norwegian municipalities. The capacity-building workshops took place in April, May and June 2023, attracting 40 enthusiastic participants, including directors, municipal managers, unit managers, and key youth workers. By involving influential leaders, the initiative aimed to effectively anchor the trajectories and drive positive changes within institutions. The primary objective was to enhance knowledge and inclusive development of youth participation in municipalities. Two experienced trainers in this and the Democracy Reloading project were invited to develop a workshop model for testing the Toolkit's relevance and providing valuable learning experiences to the municipalities involved. Before the events took place, a preparatory meeting with the young people in the youth councils was made (see Fig. 4). The consulted young people provided inputs on what was important to them to emphasise in the workshops.

*Problem statement.* The core issue identified is the lack of knowledge and skills related to youth participation among young people themselves, hindering meaningful involvement in decision-making processes. Conversely, there is a will to involve young people, but because there is lack of knowledge about what it entails and actual practical skills, participation does not occur. The law requiring all municipalities to have a youth council came in 2019 and is therefore fairly new [16]. Typically, a single municipal worker is responsible for youth participation, leading to insufficient time for proper implementation. Lack of support from management and other municipal departments further hampers systematic youth participation. When there is no commitment from youth, it is perceived as the young people's disinterest and one does not see the connection between the lack of such commitment and the municipality's lack of apparatus to facilitate participation. The pilot workshops aim to address these challenges. The workshops were elaborated by an appropriation of the Democracy Reloading approach to correspond to the national framework and alignment with existing laws and regulations. Also, collaboration with Statens Hus [17], a pilot project on behalf of the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development to test enhanced collaboration between public sector organisations in



**Fig. 4** Young members of the youth councils reflect upon what they thought was the most important to facilitate their local participation

the same living and labour market region, facilitated the establishment of a “cluster of knowledge” dedicated to youth participation in the Lister region.

*Design methodology.* The 2-day workshops consisted of four parts: (i) law and framework, (ii) culture and support for youth participation, (iii) strategies, plans and visibility of youth participation, and (iv) learning objectives and learning plan. The methodology was appropriated to municipalities, therefore, in some cases when there were less participants and availability, the workshop was adapted and delivered in a single day. In exchange, participants were required to bring their plans and strategies for reflection and discussion during the workshop. The workshops were based on the co-design principles outlined in Fig. 5.

Throughout the workshop, participants explored the Reference Framework and reflected on how these competencies are present in their current work and organisation, as well as identifying areas for further development (see Fig. 6).

Various methods were used, such as analysing selected plans or strategies to assess the expression of youth participation and its application in their work. This allowed participants to reflect on the clarity of their message and its impact on their work management. Rating the content of plans and strategies helped gauge how well the competencies are reflected. The workshop also utilised a deck of cards representing different skills, which prompts conversations and dialogues (see Fig. 7). Participants prioritised the organisational environment competencies and used the cards to determine which competencies were aligned with their municipality and department. Experiences were categorised into green (good), yellow (improvement needed), and red (work required) piles, fostering reflections and different perspectives.

<h2>Co-design Principles</h2>	
<p><b>Co-creation</b></p> <p>Reflecting on how to actively engage young people in youth councils to gather their feedback on experiences. The importance of attitudes and values was highlighted, and the lack of effective communication and involvement of young people by adults was identified.</p>	<p><b>Holistic approach</b></p> <p>Recognising the collective knowledge, skills, networks, and access to diverse groups of young people possessed by municipalities. By bringing individuals together, a broader perspective on participation efforts was gained, leading to a more positive outlook and a belief in positive change.</p>
<p><b>Visualisation</b></p> <p>Starting from the municipalities' plans, existing participation strategies and involvement of children and young people were identified. This constructive approach allowed for the identification of areas needing improvement or strengthening, focusing on enhancing practices rather than dwelling on mistakes.</p>	<p><b>Test early and often</b></p> <p>Implementing the workshop in multiple municipalities, making adjustments to methods and content with each iteration. Eventually, a two-day and a one-day workshop format were developed. Small municipalities benefited from participating alongside others, enabling them to compare practices and challenge each other.</p>

**Fig. 5** The co-design principles are integrated in the content of capacity-building workshops



**Fig. 6** Employees from different parts of the municipality met to discuss how to improve youth participation

*Results.* By breaking down the general objective of youth participation into concrete knowledge and skills required by employees and organisations, the workshop enabled a structured and targeted approach to success. The aftermath of the workshop expects to have more municipalities develop competence plans and strategically work towards enhancing youth participation. The workshop also aimed to establish a common language and coordinated approach to youth participation within organisations and cross-departments. Through collaboration, participants could tap into the collective knowledge and skills available, realising the potential for engaging

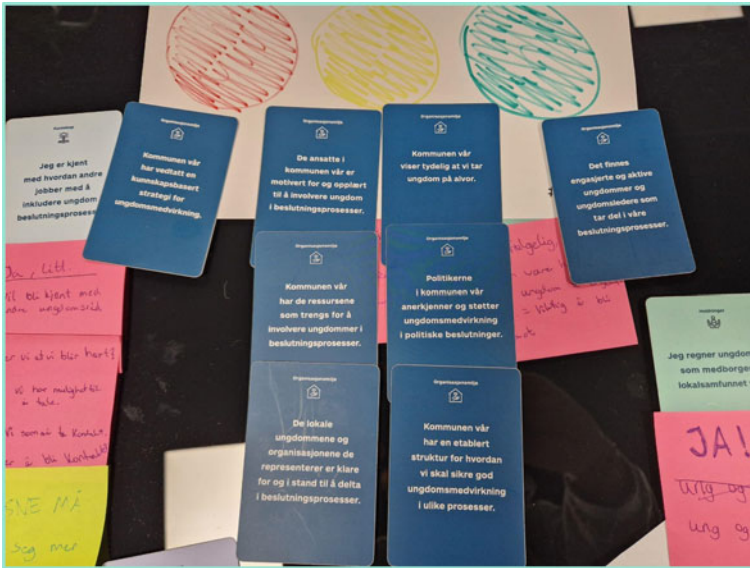


Fig. 7 Exercise with cards to determine the alignment of competencies with each municipality

vulnerable groups of young people and creating a youth-friendly municipality. The participants expressed that they have not previously reflected on the content and usefulness of youth participation for their organisation. They also highlighted a lack of collaboration within the organisation and across departments to facilitate participation. This initiative helped municipal workers to understand how the work of different departments and workers complement each other in knowledge and skill set. The workshop successfully addressed these gaps and raised awareness of the necessary structural transformation.

*Sustainability.* Sustainability is a key strength of the trainers as workshop providers, as their shared experience within the municipality equips them with a deeper knowledge of processes and challenges. They acknowledge the need for effective communication between trainers and the National Agency to ensure alignment on expectations and project continuation. They plan to present the workshop to various stakeholders and emphasise its relevance to municipal decision-making processes. Despite challenges in obtaining support from leaders, the trainers believe the workshop aligns with legislative expectations for municipalities. They aim to produce a comprehensive report showcasing the workshop’s content and practical value. They intend to maintain communication with participating municipalities and arrange a study visit to share experiences and assess long-term impact. The trainers aspire to replicate pilot workshops to multiple municipalities in the Agder region.

### 3.2 Co-design in Democracy Practice in Flanders, Belgium

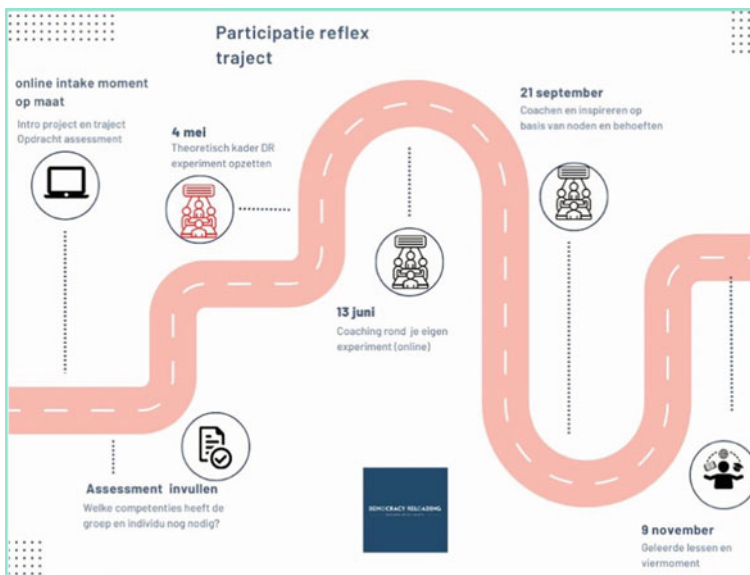
*Context.* In Flanders, the Democracy Reloading initiative has launched a service composed of a six-month learning trajectory aimed at promoting youth participation and integrating it into the municipality's structure. The trajectory commenced on 4 May 2023, and consisted of sessions held on 13 June, 25 September, and 9 November and mentoring follow-ups (see Fig. 8).

Over six months, the trajectory pursued the following objectives:

1. Facilitating acquaintance among participants.
2. Familiarising participants with the provided toolkit.
3. Identifying the competencies participants needed to develop further.
4. Encouraging participants to initiate local experiments promoting youth participation.
5. Sharing lessons learned among participants.

This trajectory was intentionally co-designed by the national agency, municipal workers and other experts as an experimental approach, acknowledging the value of learning from trial-and-error. A group of six participants from five municipalities in Flanders was involved to ensure a safe environment and ample space for mutual learning in Beveren, Sint-Niklaas, Menen, Izegem and Kortrijk.

Through this trajectory, the aim is to encourage municipal workers to engage with various competencies from the Toolkit. The expected outcome is to not only create



**Fig. 8** A roadmap of capacity-building trajectory

an awareness about a need to develop competencies for youth empowerment but also to advocate for youth participation and embed it systematically.

The national practice in Flanders endeavours to actively engage children and young people in decision-making processes that affect them, aligning with the growing recognition of their civic participation in society. One of such examples are youth officials who are following the pilot programme together with the trainers (see Fig. 9). This is seen as an important step towards an inclusive and democratic society. The normative context in Flanders is increasingly emphasising the right of children and young people to be heard and to participate in matters that influence their lives. This is aligned with international treaties such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of 20 November 1989 [18].

At the political level, there are various initiatives and programmes aimed at promoting civic participation of children and young people. For example, advisory councils and youth parliaments are established where young people can have a say in policy decisions. Additionally, subsidies and support are provided to organisations that encourage children and young people to make their voices heard.

Societally, there is an increasing appreciation for intergenerational cooperation through co-creation. There is a growing awareness that involving young people in decision-making processes leads to better policy outcomes and strengthens the culture of participation in society. The current institutional behaviour at the local level varies, but there are municipalities and organisations actively working to involve children and young people in policy development. In Flanders, there are many youth



**Fig. 9** The youth officials and the coaches

organisations, like Bataljong, De Ambrassade and Kind & Samenleving that actively contribute.

Overall, there is an ongoing development in Flanders regarding the civic participation of children and young people. Efforts are being made to strive for an inclusive society where the voices of young people are heard and taken seriously in decision-making processes. However, it is up to each municipality to autonomously decide for itself how much it can invest in participation. An investigation in Flanders demonstrates that the participation of children and young people is usually promoted ad hoc rather than systematically. The study “Participation of Children and Young People in Flanders: An Overview” conducted by the Flemish Children’s Rights Commissioner was published in 2017. The study analysed the participation opportunities for children and young people at various policy levels, such as schools, youth organisations, municipalities, and provinces. The findings indicated that participation often remains limited, such as consulting children and young people on specific topics or events, rather than being structurally embedded in decision-making processes.

*Problem statement.* In Flanders, many enthusiastic municipal workers are working on the civic participation of children and young people. They often have the knowledge to engage with the target group and employ appropriate methodologies to gather their opinions. The co-design practice addresses the lack of formal integration of youth participation within broader city policies. The Toolkit offers a comprehensive approach to acquiring the necessary competencies. It challenges municipal workers to work with various stakeholders, disseminate results within and outside the organisation, and develop strategies for systematic embedment of participation.

*Design methodology.* The six-month-long learning trajectory is a pilot programme co-designed by Bataljong and a freelance trainer and Sint-Niklaas Municipality in collaboration with Jint vzw as a step-by-step process:

- Warm-up: As a warm-up and prior to the launch, the selected participants were asked to complete the self-assessment available on the Democracy Reloading website.
- Introductions: The introductory session on 4 May welcomed cities and municipalities. This allowed them to familiarise themselves with the Reference Framework and encouraged them to work on competencies that strengthen youth participation within their local policies.
- Contextualisation: According to the results of self-assessment, the five municipalities elaborated their topics for experimentation that could have a positive impact on their local contexts (see Fig. 10).
- Benchmarking: In the second session on 13 June, a coaching call took place where the participants were asked to define different steps/milestones in realising their experiments. Together with the trainers, they created their action roadmaps.
- A talk: On 25 June, a physical gathering was organised in which an inspiring speaker introduced nudging techniques, drawing from teachings of Socrates.
- Conclusions: On 9 November, there is a final meeting with the participants, where the lessons learnt and insights are shared. An exploration on dissemination of results in Flanders will be made.

**Fig. 10** The participants analyse the assessments and consider which competencies from the Reference Framework they want to base their experiment on



Through an experiential learning approach, each participant prioritised the competencies from the Reference Framework relevant to their practice and conducted practice as an experiment. After the experimentation and conclusion of this trajectory, the lessons learnt were shared with other Flemish cities and municipalities, encouraging wider use of the proposed approach and Toolkit.

*Results.* The participants reflected on their key challenges and reframed them into the six topics and real-life experiments that will be implemented as local pilot co-design projects (see Fig. 11).

These experiments are being planned and monitored through an online collaborative platform MIRO (see Fig. 12). This allows trainers to keep track of the development of each participant's progress, as well as for participants to get inspired one by another by checking out each other's planning.

The key result is to strengthen the competencies of the six participants so that they are equipped and motivated to pursue actions necessary to embed youth participation in their municipalities. By having participants as in-house ambassadors competent to bring change, it could be sufficient to reinforce structural changes towards involving young people in policy-making. There is also an expectation that within these five municipalities, young people will also notice the outcomes and impact of their participation in the pilot projects.

*Sustainability.* In the reflection with six participants, the trainers will consider whether they will organise a follow-up after November 2023 to ensure the impact assessment. First impressions are positive as the youth officers recognised the opportunity for peer learning and exchanges across municipalities. The programme's insights will be shared within Flanders, and if successful, it may be repeated annually with a larger group of participants. The process can be enhanced by incorporating

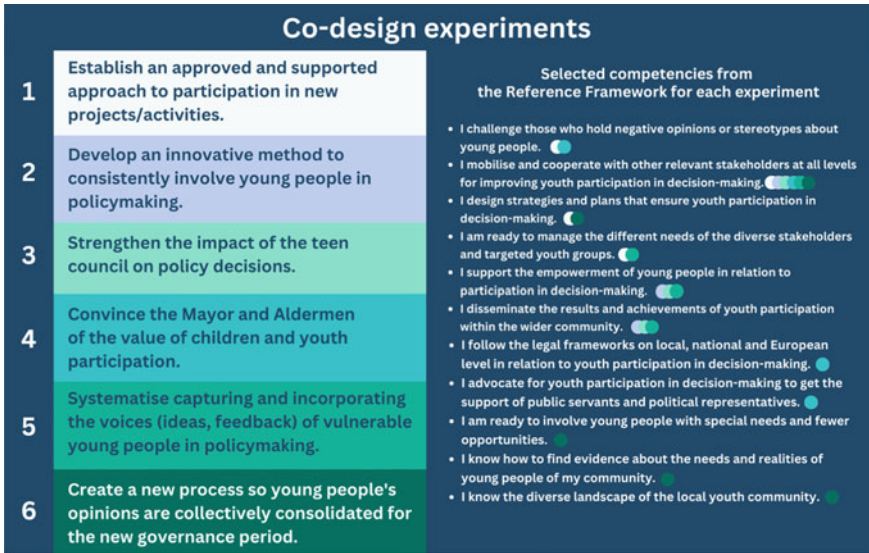


Fig. 11 The topics of participants’ real-life experiments (pilots) and associated competencies

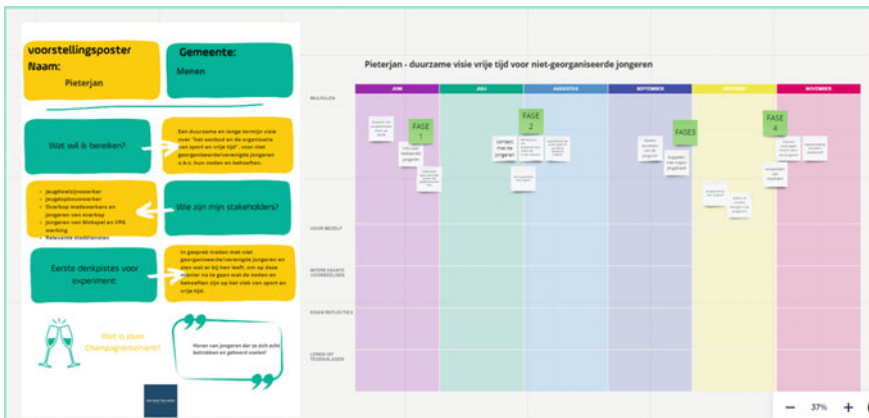


Fig. 12 The MIRO board of one of the participant’s real-life experiments. This planning is shared with other participants so they can get inspired from each others’ work

feedback from participants and stakeholders, continuously evaluating the impact, and refining the Toolkit and methodologies accordingly. Local and national partnerships with organisations like Bataljong, Jint vzw, and the involved trainers significantly contribute to the successful implementation of the pilot programme.